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ABSTRACT

At community colleges, women currently comprise approximately 20% of all chief executive officer (CEO) positions. The single most important source from which new community college CEO candidates are selected, however, is the pool of deans of instruction and since 21% of current deans are women, it is likely that these numbers will rise. Moreover, there is evidence that the way in which college presidents approach leadership is changing from "take charge" approaches often associated with male leaders to approaches emphasizing participatory and shared decision-making. A 1990 study of executives in business and management concluded that female executives tended to be more interested than male executives in transforming people's self-interest into organizational goals by encouraging feelings of individual self-worth, active participation, and the sharing of power and information. As the number of female community college presidents increases, they will be able to influence the culture of the community college in the following ways: (1) encourage the elimination of institutional gender stereotypes; (2) redefine power and the power structure of the institution; (3) enact gender-related policies and procedures; (4) raise collegial consciousness and initiate collegial dialogue on gender and related issues; and (5) take a proactive stance on public policy and debate beyond the local campus. Contains 12 references. (HAA)

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Digest

October 1996 EDO-JC-97-02

Women in Community College Leadership Roles

by Veronica Getskow

Women currently hold nearly 16% of the chief executive officer positions (CEO) at 453 colleges and universities in the United States. This represents a sizable increase over the last two decades; in 1975, women held only 5% of CEO positions. At community colleges, the data are less clear, but it would appear that women have gained slightly more ground, now comprising approximately 20% of all CEOs of two-year accredited institutions (American Council on Education, 1995).

This *Digest* reviews some of the current literature on the status of women holding administrative positions in community colleges, their styles of leadership, and the ways in which they can promote future opportunities for women in their institutions.

Women's Rise to the Presidency

According to Vaughan (1989), the single most important source from which new community college presidential candidates can be selected is the pool of deans of instruction. Since 21% of current academic deans are women, it seems likely that the number of women presidents may continue to increase as more rise from these ranks. From a survey of 58 female community college presidents, Vaughan reports that key role models and mentors are major influences for women seeking leadership positions.

Research on Women's Styles of Leadership

There is evidence that the way in which college presidents approach leadership issues is rapidly changing. Vaughan (1986) notes that images of community college presidents have undergone a dramatic metamorphosis over the last thirty years, keeping pace with the changes the colleges themselves have made. Familiar leadership styles have evolved from the stern, "take charge" images often associated with male leaders. Vaughan's work in 1986 and 1989 suggests that each new generation of community college presidents has moved closer to an approach emphasizing participatory and shared decision-making. Baker (1992) notes a paradigm shift in leadership style for the 21st century that views leading and managing as a holistic, inclusive process, rather than one in which a single leader's viewpoint dominates.

The approach described by Baker is evidenced in studies of women in leadership roles. Judith Rosener's 1990 business and management study of female and male executives with similar backgrounds concluded that women tend to manage in different ways than do men. Female executives were found to be more interested in transforming people's self interest into organizational goals by encouraging feelings of individual self worth, active participation, and sharing of power and information. On the other hand, she found that men tend to lead through a series of what she identifies as "transactions," concrete exchanges which involved rewarding employees for a job well done and punishing them for an inadequate job performance.

In the context of the issues and trends that shaped the women's movement, Astin and Leland (1991) look at leadership development as a "process of empowerment." Their analysis, based on interviews with 75 women representing three generations, focused on women leaders who demonstrated passionate commitment, believed in involving others in the leadership process, and possessed keen self-awareness and interpersonal communication skills.

Megatrends for Women, published in 1992, supports and expands the concept of a unique leadership style more prevalent among women. Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) coined the term "women leadership" to describe what they consider to be a personality that reflected women's values and leadership behavioral characteristics. These researchers identified 25 behaviors that characterized women's leadership and clustered them into six central patterns identified as: behaviors that empower, restructure, teach, provide role models, encourage openness, and stimulate questioning.

Two researchers studying leadership in the community college setting are Rosemary Gillett-Karam and Sandra Acebo. Gillett-Karam (1994) frames leadership in four ways: (1) taking appropriate risks to bring about change, a "vision" behavior; (2) providing caring and respect for individual differences, a "people" behavior; (3) acting collaboratively, an "influence" behavior; and (4) building trust and openness, a "values" behavior. Gillett-Karam's work on behavioral characteristics of leaders revealed that effective leadership is more behaviorally derived than gender based, and that leadership is subject to the dynamics and interactions of people and institutions. In Gillett-Karam's view, leadership depends on situations, not gender. Acebo (1994) has a slightly different perspective,

viewing the community college leader as a team leader. Acebo encourages community college leaders to bring shared leadership and accountability into focus within their organizations. She compares and contrasts established leadership models in her work but argues that efforts to create dynamic teams with "synergy," a form of group energy, is part of the paradigm shift taking place in leadership styles.

Another work promoting teamwork as a viable leadership model for community colleges is Bensimon and Neumann's (1996) look at concepts of leadership in *Redesigning College Leadership: Teams and Teamwork in Higher Education*. George Baker (1995) provides a wealth of information on the team-building process in *Team Building for Quality: Transition in the American Community College*. Teamwork and its application to higher education is also discussed extensively in the Fall 1994 issue of New Directions for Higher Education, No. 87, *Developing Administrative Excellence: Creating a Culture of Leadership*.

Future Changes

As more women join the ranks of community college presidents, their power base for creating change will grow. Women community college presidents are in a position to contribute fresh perspectives on leadership within their institutions and in society as a whole. DiCroce (1995) and Vaughan (1989) suggest ways in which women leaders can influence the culture of the community college and improve future opportunities for women:

1. **Encourage elimination of institutional gender stereotypes:** As more women become community college presidents, their presence will help chip away at gender barriers and "double standards" that may exist at their institutions.

2. **Redefine power and the power structure of the institution:** Women presidents are well positioned to model and create a power structure built less on hierarchy and more on relations, with a free exchange of information and an open environment for collegial debate and discussion.

3. **Enact gender-related policies and procedures:** Women community college presidents are uniquely situated to promote diversity and enforce strong policies on sexual assault and harassment.

4. **Raise collegial consciousness and initiate collegial dialogue on gender and related issues:** Women leaders can advocate and promote focus groups, brown bag lunches, discussion sessions, and guest speakers on campus to bring updated information to the college community.

5. **Take a proactive stance on public policy and debate beyond the local campus:** The community college president has an opportunity to mingle and network with a varied population of peers, researchers, legislators, and professional associations and continue advocacy efforts for women in the regional, state, and national arenas.

Conclusions

As researchers continue to expand studies on women presidents in community colleges and their leadership styles, a picture of the depth and breadth of the impact women are making at this educational level will emerge. One thing is clear--women's voices are becoming more influential in the community college.

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